

## EVA CLAYTON

The first African–American woman to represent North Carolina in Congress, Eva Clayton became the state’s first black Representative since 1901. From her post on the House Agriculture Committee, Clayton advanced the interests of her rural district in the northeastern part of her state and called attention to the economic inequalities that affected African Americans nationally.



Eva McPherson was born in Savannah, Georgia, on September 16, 1934. She grew up in North Carolina and received a Bachelor of Science degree in biology from Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1955. In 1962, she earned an M.S. in biology and general science from North Carolina Central University in Durham. Shortly after receiving her undergraduate degree, Eva McPherson married Theaoseus Clayton, who became a prominent lawyer. They raised four children: Theaoseus Jr., Martin, Reuben, and Joanne.

The civil rights movement mobilized Eva Clayton to become active in civic and political affairs. At one point, she even picketed her husband’s law office to protest Theaoseus’s and his white law partner’s ownership of a building that contained a segregated restaurant. As early as 1968, Eva Clayton was recruited by civil rights activist Vernon Jordan to seek election to Congress in a north–central North Carolina district. Though Clayton won 31 percent of the vote in the Democratic primary, incumbent Lawrence Fountain prevailed.

In the early 1970s, she worked for several public/private ventures, including the North Carolina Health Manpower Development Program at the University of North Carolina. In 1974 she cofounded and served as the executive director of Soul City Foundation, a housing organization that renovated dilapidated buildings for use as homeless shelters and daycare centers. Two years later, she worked on the successful gubernatorial campaign of Jim Hunt, who later appointed Clayton the assistant secretary of the North Carolina department of natural resources and community development. Clayton served in that capacity from 1977 until 1981. After leaving state government, she founded an economic development consulting firm. In 1982 she won election to the Warren County Board of Commissioners, which she chaired until 1990. Over the next decade, Clayton helped steer more than \$550 million in investments into the county and also successfully passed a bond issue for the construction of new schools.

When Representative Walter Jones, Sr., announced his retirement in 1992, Clayton entered the Democratic primary to fill his seat. Recently reapportioned by the state legislature, the congressional district was one of two in North Carolina that had a black majority. Jones died in September 1992, and his son Walter, Jr., who was considered the favorite in the primary, captured 38 percent to Clayton's 31 but fell two points shy of winning the nomination outright. In the runoff, Clayton secured the support of her other primary opponents and won 55 percent to Jones's 45 percent.

On November 3, 1992, she won the special election to fill the last two months of Walter Jones, Sr.'s unexpired term in the 102nd Congress (1991–1993) and defeated Republican Ted Tyler for a full term in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995). Mel Watt, an African American, also won election from a North Carolina district to the House on November 3, but because Clayton was elected to the 102nd Congress, she became the first African–American Representative from North Carolina since George White, who left Congress in 1901

In November 2001, Clayton declined to seek renomination to a sixth term in the House. She had been involved in intense bargaining with state legislators to ensure that her predominantly African–American district was “protected” during reapportionment after the 2000 Census. “My heart is leading me somewhere else,” Clayton said. “I don’t know exactly where that is, but I do want to have another opportunity for public service before I really hang it up.” Clayton was succeeded by an African–American, Frank Ballance, Jr., in the fall 2002 elections.

After leaving Congress in January 2003, Clayton accepted a three-year assignment with the Food Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations in Rome, Italy. As the Assistant Director General and Special Advisor to the Director, she worked to reduce hunger, malnutrition and poverty.

Clayton faithfully served the people of North Carolina and the United States. She continues to be active in agriculture, rural development, and food security, and her community.

We thank her for her many years of service.